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FM AMEMBASSY TEGUCIGALPA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7021
INFO RUEHBE/AMEMBASSY BELMOPAN IMMEDIATE 0076
RUEHGT/AMEMBASSY GUATEMALA IMMEDIATE 3949
RUEHMU/AMEMBASSY MANAGUA IMMEDIATE 2689
RUEHZP/AMEMBASSY PANAMA IMMEDIATE 1325
RUEHSJ/AMEMBASSY SAN JOSE IMMEDIATE 3443
RUEHSN/AMEMBASSY SAN SALVADOR IMMEDIATE 1528
RUMIAAA/HQ USSOUTHCOM J5 MIAMI FL IMMEDIATE
RUMIAAA/CDR USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL IMMEDIATE
RUMIAAA/CDR USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL//CINC/POLAD// IMMEDIATE
RUEAHND/CDRJTFB SOTO CANO HO IMMEDIATE
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RHMFISS/DIRJIATF SOUTH IMMEDIATE
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC IMMEDIATE
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C O N F I D E N T I A L TEGUCIGALPA 001678

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TAGS: [MARR](#) [MASS](#) [MCAP](#) [MOPS](#) [PBTS](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [PNAT](#)
PREL, HO
SUBJECT: SOTO CANO DUAL USE DISCUSSIONS: WE ARE ALL IN
AGREEMENT

Classified By: Ambassador Charles Ford, Reason 1.4 (b and d)

11. (C) Summary: On October 18, U.S. and Honduran delegations met to discuss possible future commercial use of the air strip at Soto Cano airbase at Palmerola. The discussions were cordial and productive. The USG recognized the sovereign right of the GOH to use the strip for commercial purposes, both parties underscored their mutual interests in maintaining a U.S. military presence at Soto Cano, and we discussed security and protection requirements plus required costs associated with commercializing the strip. The parties agreed that the only way to commercialize the strip would be to divide the base down the middle of the runway and create separate military and civilian sides. The Hondurans stated that there is no need for further discussions until they can conclude cost feasibility studies. The Minister of Defense (MOD) and the Chief of Defense (CHOD) both stated they would be reporting back to Honduran President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya with their conclusions. End Summary.

12. (SBU) On October 18, post participated in discussions with the GOH on possible commercial use of the air strip at Soto Cano air base at Palmerola. The USG was represented by the DCM, PolCouns, Econ off, DAO, Milgrp, and Joint Task Force Bravo. The Hondurans were represented by General Romeo Vazquez Velazquez (CHOD), General Venacio Cervantes Suazo (Head of the Honduran Air Force), and Gabriela Membreno and Juan Alberto Lara of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (fairly low-level representatives). Minister of Defense Aristides Mejia joined the meeting at the conclusion. The discussions were extremely cordial and all parties came to the same conclusions. The USG recognized the sovereign right of the GOH to use the strip for commercial purposes, both the GOH and USG underscored their mutual interests in maintaining a U.S. military presence at Soto Cano, and we discussed security and protection requirements plus required costs associated with commercializing the strip.

13. (C) Following cordial greetings, JTF-B Deputy Commander Larry Ott gave a presentation on the services that JTF-B

currently provides to the Honduran Armed Forces (HOAF) and the Honduran Air Force Academy, which includes water and sewage treatment, electricity, runway maintenance and operations, control tower support, perimeter security, fire and emergency services, etc. Ott explained that U.S law does not allow the Department of Defense to provide these services to commercial or civilian entities, even for monetary reimbursement. Ott explained that the only viable option for commercialization was by dividing the base down the runway to create two distinct areas: the east for military use and the west for commercial. This solution would require the Hondurans to acquire land currently used for agricultural purposes, plus build a road to connect the civilian side to the main road (CA-5) to Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. The GOH would also have to install its own electrical and water sources, build fences, provide security, and purchase ramps and other equipment. Runway maintenance and fire, emergency, and other services JTF-B currently provides would also have to be discussed in the future.

14. (C) General Cervantes, head of the Honduran Air Force, then made a presentation on behalf of the HOAF, which included the reasons for wanting to commercialize the air strip. Cervantes noted that the area is conveniently centrally located, the population is growing, and maquilas and other international industries are beginning to locate in the region. They expressed a desire to try to help the area's economy grow, and noted increased pressure from businesses and residents. Comment: As an aside, the CHOD told PolCouns that President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya, and all presidential candidates are forced to give their opinions on commercialization of the air strip at Soto Cano during their presidential campaigns, and Zelaya is now looking to at least

look like he is responding to his promises and their current pressure. End Comment. Cervantes then agreed with the JTF-B conclusion that the only way to successfully mix military and commercial use would be to split the facilities at the runway and keep civilian usage on the west side. He said that in order to mix military and civilian usage on the east side of the base, all the buildings would have to be razed in order to meet code requirements for a civilian facility, and those costs would be exorbitant.

15. (C) The CHOD then asked Cervantes what requirements would have to be met to have some commercial cargo flights use the air strip in the short term. The CHOD referred to a small number of commercial cargo flights that had used the strip in the past. Cervantes replied that civilian tower facilities would need to be constructed because the facilities that were used approximately fifteen years ago no longer exist. Cervantes also noted that this construction would be greatly inhibited by the fact that a company called "InterAirports" currently has an iron-clad twenty-year concession to build all airport facilities. The CHOD suggested that a small warehouse might be built near the Academy to support these flights, but following the meetings, he agreed that this facility would be much easier to operate if it were to be located off premises.

16. (C) The MFA representatives then asked a few questions regarding the operations, since neither had ever visited Soto Cano air base. They agreed with both JTF-B and Cervantes that it made no sense to try to co-mingle both civilian and military usage on the east side.

17. (C) In conclusion, the CHOD stated that the most important result of the meeting was that the USG is agreeable to the commercialization of the air strip. It is now up to the Hondurans, he said, to see if it is cost effective. The CHOD said he would be writing up a summary of this meeting to present it to President Zelaya, and that at this point there would be no need for any further discussions until the GOH had made its economic feasibility study. The MOD then joined the meeting, was briefed, and agreed with the CHOD's conclusions. He said he would be reporting directly to the President later in day.

18. (C) Comments: Following the meeting, the Honduran delegation privately assured the members of the U.S. delegation that they agreed completely with the USG that commercialization could only be realized if the base were to be split down the runway and the military and civilian areas were completely separated. They told us that they have been forced to call these discussions simply because of political pressures. At this point, the DAO told the CHOD that the U.S. military might be amenable to allowing a few intermittent commercial cargo flights to arrive at the base, which could be unloaded and transported to off-base storage facilities. With no direct costs incurred by the USG (such as fuel, water, electricity) and security concerns minimized, this could be a temporary political win. The CHOD was greatly appreciative of this offer and promised to pass the message to the MOD. End Comment.
FORD